A Japan That Can Say Yes. We should welcome the nationalism of Prime Minister Abe

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The Conventional Wisdom is that the ascension of Japan's Shinzo Abe to the prime minister's post is bad news for Japan and, by extension, the United States. Abe is an ardent nationalist who, the thinking goes, will unleash the country's lurking militarism, thus isolating Japan and, indirectly, Washington from the rest of Asia. But this misreads the nature of Abe's nationalism and the positive effects it could have on Asia.

Abe's nationalism is of a type familiar to Americans. It is a liberal nationalism. He and his advisers equate Japan's well-being with the spread of the universal values associated with liberal democracy and human rights.

Much has been written about Japan's new global assertiveness and its decision to change its "peace constitution" and take on a greater military role in Asia. What is less discussed is the change that has put democracy promotion at the forefront of Japan's foreign policy.

In a joint statement with President Bush on June 29, 2006, Japanese prime minister Junichiro Koizumi pledged to make democracy promotion the cornerstone of the U.S.-Japanese alliance. The prime minister then set about reforming Japan's overseas development assistance program, "the bread and butter" of its foreign policy. In the past, Japan assiduously avoided politicizing the program, giving loans and assistance to foreign governments without much concern for the character of the governments themselves. In the future, however, Japanese de-

velopment aid will be linked to a recipient's progress in democratic reform.

True, Abe has made revision of Article 9 of the Japanese constitution--the so-called peace article--a centerpiece of his campaign for prime minister. And Abe has certainly been hawkish on both North Korea and China, recently musing aloud that Tokyo should think about acquiring military capabilities to strike North Korea before Japan itself is hit. (Abe himself jokes that his country, once confident in the goodwill of its neighbors, has been "mugged by reality.") But a liberalism that wants to defend itself is no less liberal for doing so.

More to the point is Abe's own vision of greater cooperation among Australia, Japan, India, and America, the four great Asia-Pacific democracies. If Japan is going to be a more confident actor in Asia and on the world stage, it will aim to do so in the context of this like-minded community. This vision could end up as Abe's greatest legacy.

Asia today lacks the kinds of effective multilateral in stitutions that have soothed historical grievances in Europe. What it has is a mishmash of regional organizations, composed of distinctly different governments with distinctly different views of what constitutes real security and good governance. These organizations can be sounding boards for problems, but rarely do they provide actual solutions. Yet Asia's security problems are increasingly urgent and transnational in scope: a nuclear, proliferating North Korea, radical Islamic insurgencies in transitional democracies, and a rising China willing and able to throw its newfound weight around the region.

To address these problems, Asia needs a new multilateral network based on the universal values that Japan has embraced. Washington should welcome such a development, with Japan, Australia, the United States, and India as its core. While Beijing will complain that a security community made up of Asian democracies is simply a tool for containing China, there is no reason to believe any of these democracies will be any less willing to engage with it. And the fact is there are other organizations in Asia, some of which China has been at the forefront in creating, of which the United States is not a part.

Moreover, like NATO and the European Union, this Asian club of democracies should have an open door. If a country, China included, moves decidedly in the direction of political reform, there will be no reason to exclude it. In the meantime, however, what an association of Asian democracies will do is give renewed confidence to the smaller states in China's neighborhood that the preponderance of economic, diplomatic, and military power lies with states that are more predictable in their ambitions.

Naysayers will scoff at the idea that Japan is in a position to play this kind of role in Asia until it has dealt squarely with the "history issue."

True, Japan can do more to assuage the pain of the past and reassure others such as South Korea and the Philippines that it truly is a new country. But this will be difficult as long as the Chinese Communist party--itself responsible for millions of Chinese deaths--is leading the chorus against Japan.

For Beijing, Japan's past is a diplomatic weapon that can be used to isolate Japan from its neighbors and make other countries wary of its attempt to play a different international role. It has very little to do with moral culpability and everything to do with a contest of wills in which China is bound and determined to keep Japan from exercising that new role.

Washington should see China's stratagem for what it is and, instead, support Japan's effort to become a "normal" democratic power.

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